

American Talkers:

The Auctioneer

By Steven Zeitlin

Moving down rows of piled tobacco with an entourage of bidders and clerks, auctioneer Bob Cage refers to his sale as a train. "As I'm crying the bids, they've got to get on or they're going to miss the tobacco." Once he "gets clicking," the sale builds momentum, and the buyers must put in their bids before the final call. "I'm going to cry a bid a few times, and then I'm going to WHACK IT."

The livestock or antique auctioneer works up an audience with a barrage of fast talk, musical sound, and humorous quips. He pits members of his audience against one another. If a person bids 5, he'll say, "Do I hear 6?" If he doesn't hear 6, he keeps the chant moving as fast as the ear can discern, building a momentum with his rolls—"Will you go 6? Will you give 6? Will you buy 'em at 6? Will you bid 6? Will you say 6? Do I hear 6? Did you say 6?" he may throw in nonsense syllables like this one from a popular song: "whack-a-doo, whack-a-doo." Even at slow moments, bids appear to be flying past.

Unlike the pitchman, the auctioneer does not tantalize the audience with images of an unseen product. All that he sells is open for examination before and during the sale, and the bidders themselves determine the price.

But with his chant, his humor, and his familiarity with the audience, he can induce people to spend far more than they may intend. He coaxes. He cajoles. He makes folks feel that they have money to burn, that they know something the next fellow does not. He taunts reluctant bidders. He teases and tempts his audience. And he torments them with the lurking notion that at any moment the train might leave the station without them.

1 The tobacco auctioneer's rapid-fire chant may be unintelligible to an untrained ear, but it communicates much information to the buyers who follow up and down the rows. It is his skill in calling prices and setting the sale's rhythm that helps determine the price of the tobacco.

2 Some auction houses allow any one to contribute items for auction. People often bring possessions they no longer need, then sit in the audience and bid on other items. This constant buying and selling of household goods often becomes part of rural life.

Photo by Margaret Yocom



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Photo by Gerry Parsons

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Photo by Paul Wagner

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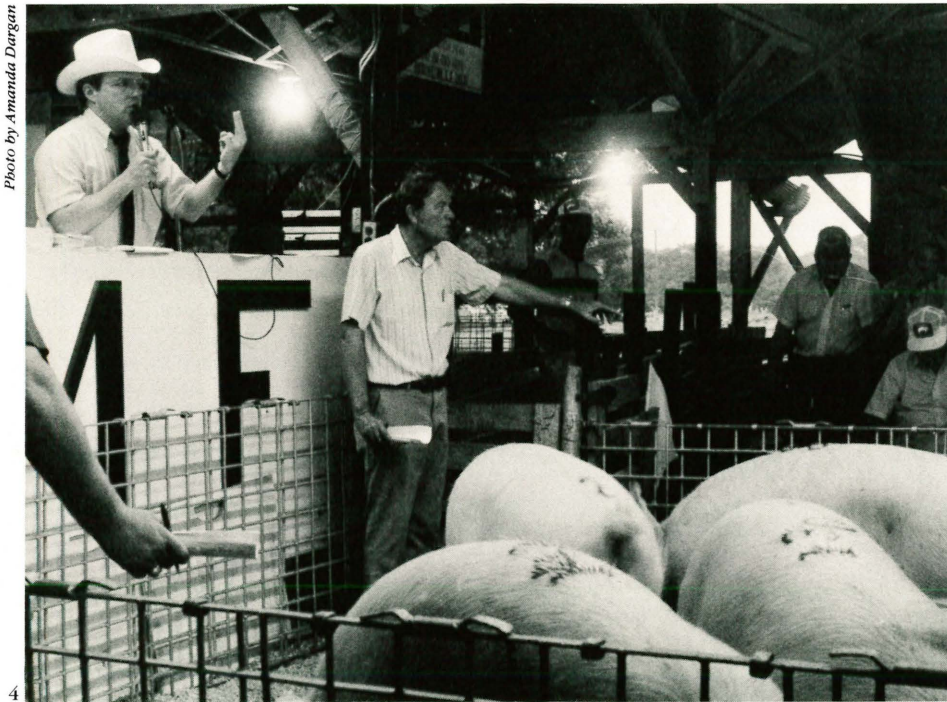


Photo by Amanda Dargan

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Photo by Amanda Dargan

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3 "You have to be part showman", said one auctioneer. The sale is entertainment, perhaps as much as it is a commercial exchange. Some of the audience are spectators with no intention of bidding. With bleachers looking down into an arena, the staging of a livestock auction has been compared by folklorist Margaret Yocom to theater-in-the round.

4 A livestock auction, like a tobacco auction, caters to trained buyers familiar with an auctioneer's chant. This enables him to deliver his pitch at breakneck speed and still be understood.

The auctioneer's charisma spreads "auction fever" through the crowd. "When I'm here I feel like I'm at the racetrack," one participant commented.

Much of the cacophony of these auctions comes from the animals themselves as they are constantly prodded or herded before and after sale.

5 The "ringman" at livestock auctions stands close to the audience to spot bids and encourage more bidding. "Just say \$500 once," he taunts a bidder, "and you'll never have to say it again." A ringman often plays the straightman for an auctioneer's jokes.

6 Pigs relaxing before going to auction.



Photo by Paul Wagner

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Suggested Reading

Bailey, Emma *Sold to the Lady in the Green Hat*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1962.

Bean, George H. *Yankee Auctioneer*. Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1948.

Cassady, Ralph Jr., *Auctions and Auctioneering*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967.

Steed, Daniel W. Jr., *Auctioneering as a Folk Art*. Masters thesis, Western Kentucky University, n.d.